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WILSON: THE NATURAL AND THE SUPERNATURAL IN SCIENCE AND RELIGION

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THE NATURAL AND THE SUPERNATURAL IN SCIENCE AND RELIGION

LECTURES TO MEN

BY THE

REV. J. M. WILSON, D.D.

SOCIETY FOR PROMOTING CHRISTIAN KNOWLEDGE
LONDON: NORTHUMBERLAND AVENUE, W.C.

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THE NATURAL AND THE SUPERNATURAL

IN SCIENCE AND RELIGION

TWO LECTURES TO MEN

Delivered in College Hall, Worcester, in December, 1915

BY THE

REV. J. M. WILSON, D.D.

CANON OF WORCESTER

Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge,

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LECTURE I

THE NATURAL AND THE SUPERNATURAL IN SCIENCE AND PHILOSOPHY

"First that which is natural," says St. Paul, "and afterwards that which is spiritual." —1 Cor. xv. 46.

I think that what I am going to say to you will be mainly an expansion of that great saying. In taking such a profound subject, I am assuming that you men, or at least many of you, think from time to time on the great questions, "What am I?" "Whence come I?" "Whither am I going?" What is the meaning, the origin, the goal of this marvellous world? Some of us are perhaps driven now to think of these eternal questions more than ever before. If so, we shall welcome any help to clear up our thoughts. Can the results of the profound thoughts of scientists, philosophers, poets and theologians of all ages be put into such plain English, that a man who has little or no time for reading, and no education in philosophy, but has a clear head and good common sense, can understand something of what the best thinkers are

trying to express? I feel sure that it is possible. That is not at all the same thing as saying that I can do it. But I am going to try. It is for you to judge whether I succeed or fail. If you understand me, I succeed: if you do not, I fail.

I once gave a lecture in Aberdeen to a highly scientific audience, on a special scientific investigation in astrophysics. The caretaker of the hall, presumably not a scientific man, spoke next day enthusiastically to one of my friends * about the lecture. "It was a grand lecture," he said, "a grand lecture indeed—the grandest I ever heard: *I didn't understand a word of it!*"

Now I did not intend that caretaker to understand *that* lecture: but if he was here to-day, I should consider that I had failed, if he did not understand this.

"First what is natural," says St. Paul. What do we mean by natural? You will see by taking examples. It is natural that water runs downhill; that a stone thrown up into the air comes down again; that day passes into night; and night into day; that fire burns; that gunpowder explodes; that plants grow; that we must eat and drink and sleep, in order to live. In fact, everything that

* The present Principal, the Very Rev. Sir George Adam Smith, D.D.

happens so regularly and certainly that we can reckon on it, we call natural. We need not understand what happens in the slightest degree : we need not understand *why* water runs downhill, or why gunpowder explodes, or why a man dies for want of food. The fact is enough. Things happen so.

The range of what is natural is very wide ; it is large enough to contain all our experience, and all the experience of all the world. All the early months of a baby's life, all the early years of a child's life are spent in learning what is natural ; that some things can be eaten, and others not ; that some things are hard, and others not ; that things are warm, or cold, and so on. And all that regularly comes within his experience as a man he considers natural. The longer he lives, and the wider his experience, the greater is to him the range of what is natural. A thousand things unknown to every one of us, are perfectly natural to other people, who possess special knowledge; to chemists, doctors, electricians, sailors, engineers, and so forth. The number of things that take place "naturally," as we say, that is, that can be relied on to happen under the same circumstances, is practically infinite. Hence there springs up what we call *natural science*, an endeavour to study and to arrange all this knowledge.

All the natural sciences that we ever heard of with their innumerable applications,—astronomy, chemistry, botany, geology, ship-building, plumbing, weaving, wireless-telegraphy, and a hundred more, are all branches of the knowledge of what is natural, that is what can be relied on as sure to happen under the same circumstances. Taken all together they constitute the subject-matter of natural or physical science.

We have not come yet to the supernatural, to anything above or outside nature. And the field of what is natural is so enormous, so interesting, so important, and so insistent, that it is not to be wondered at, if many people find it enough for them; and even if some are bold enough to say that everything that happens is natural; that there is no supernatural.

That, however, is as much as to say that what I don't know does not exist: and that would be a rash assertion for the most learned of men to make. However, learned men don't make it.

But what is there that is not *natural*?

Let us go on. Besides the things which happen regularly, there are some things which happen rarely, or even very rarely: the sun is eclipsed, or the moon; a comet appears; there is an earthquake, or a pestilence; or

something else outside the ordinary course of things. What are we to say of these? Are they to be counted natural, that is regular, sure to recur under like circumstances? or are they something different?

This is a most important question, and you must note the answer. *The answer we shall give in any case depends on our knowledge.* Before men knew what caused an eclipse of the sun, they thought it contrary to nature, outside the order of things, due to some outside force or cause, in a word, *supernatural* or miraculous. Now that men know what causes an eclipse, now that we can see in an almanack the day and hour and minute when an eclipse will begin and end, we call it natural. Our judgment of it therefore depends on our knowledge. Before men knew that pestilence had its origin in dirt, and was spread by contagion and bacilli, it seemed miraculous: it is now no longer so. To savages a watch seems miraculous. When some one, in order to impress a group of savages with his superiority took out a false eye he wore, tossed it in the air, caught and replaced it, and challenged them to do the same, the argument was to them convincing. It proved to them that he was supernatural. It cannot be too clearly understood that where there is familiar knowledge of events and processes,

they are regarded as natural; and that where anything quite unfamiliar, apparently contradicting previous experience, occurs, judgment as to its origin is suspended, and its origin has often been thought to be some power outside what was regarded as nature, that is extra-natural or supernatural. However marvellous and mysterious a process or event may be, such as the germination of a seed, the growth of a plant, the colours of a rainbow, or a shower of falling stars, if it is familiar to us, or even if we believe it to be familiar to others, we do not regard it as otherwise than natural.

It follows, of course, that there has been a continued transference, as knowledge has advanced, from the region of the unknown to the known; from the extraordinary to the ordinary; or from what was regarded as extra-natural to the natural. We are well used to the thought of this process in the past, but not so prepared to recognize that it is still going on.

To sum up, it is clear that the range of what is natural has expanded enormously; barrier after barrier has been passed, as knowledge has increased; and the conviction has grown, that had we knowledge enough, all that takes place in the material world, however seemingly capricious,—every shower of

rain, every lightning flash, the fall of every leaf, every illness of our bodies,—every such event would be seen as the inevitable consequence of something that preceded it, and therefore would rightly be called natural. The conviction, I repeat, has grown that the sphere of the natural comprehends the whole of the material world; or, to say the same thing in other words, that law, an unbreakable succession of cause and effect, is universal in this material world; that experience shows that there is no evidence for the exercise upon it of any extra-natural powers. No one would, I think, say that this is proved; but there is an overwhelming balance of competent opinion in favour of belief that it is true—that the material world is subject to fixed and unchanging sequences which we call laws, though they are not yet completely known to man. I repeat that it is *not proved.* It is a very sound working hypothesis. Some of you may know that some scientists deny that our known laws of mechanical action can explain "what is going on in the atom"; but that does not disturb their belief that "what is going on in the atom" is regular, subject to laws, though laws not yet known to us.

We have then, it would seem, not yet come to the supernatural; rather we seem to have

come, rightly or wrongly, to the conviction that there is no place for it, no room for it, at any rate no exercise of it, in the world of matter.

The world of *matter*. But do all our experiences take place in the *world of matter*? As I said a few minutes ago, the events that take place in the world of matter are so interesting to us, so important, and so insistent, that they may tend to exclude other events from our attention. But there *are* others. We cannot think of mind, will, affection, memory, reason. aspiration, belief, doubt, conscience, as events taking place in the world of matter, in the same sense as the natural processes we have been talking of. It is, then, to observation of this class of events we must next turn in our search for the supernatural, and we must examine it in the same way.

How shall we begin, and where? A saying of Augustin, an old Christian Father and Philosopher, shall be our guide. "*Interrogate thyself, O man, and make of thyself a step to the things that be above thee.*"

"*Interrogate thyself.*" This is a process, turning one's mind inwards to think about one's own thoughts, quite unlike what we have been talking about, observing the familiar processes of nature. It requires an effort,—a conscious and sustained effort.

We are going in the first place to give up thinking just now about the material world, and all that takes place in it; about water running downhill, stones falling to earth, telephones, eclipses, and everything of that sort; and we are going to deal with *life*. The material world is very, very wonderful, ranging from the starry heaven, with its infinity of stars and space, to a drop of water with its infinity of atoms in motion: but *life*—life *in* this matter, living matter, that is something with an even higher order of the wonderful in it. *Life*—its origin, nature, development, goal or purpose—this is surely a field for investigation as wide as that of physical science, and of even a higher order. "*Interrogate thyself.*" Look within. When we do so, we find something in ourselves, felt by us, witnessed to by others in every age, and in every nation, which is quite different from the fixed and regular action we see in machines, and different from the bodily processes connected with life, such as breathing, digestion, and so on, which we observe in ourselves and in other living creatures. There is mind, conscience, will, etc. This is a fundamental and universal fact of human experience. It opens an immense region for observation: this is the sphere not of physical science, which I spoke

of before, but of all the mental sciences, all the philosophies, psychologies, religions and theologies of the world. This is the supreme subject of thought and reason, which has exercised and occupied the minds of men since they first began to think.

But what an immense subject? How shall we begin?

Try and follow what I am going to say. How have men studied any great and complicated subject? The movements of sun and moon and planets and stars? the properties of the chemical elements? the origin and growth of all the various trees and plants in the world? or of all the birds and beasts and fishes and insects? of the different races of man, black, and white, red and yellow, Slav and Teuton, Latin and Celt? The mere contemplation of any of these subjects suggests, indeed necessitates, some theory;—a theory means only a way of looking at the facts. The earliest theory of the motions of the sun and moon, the theory of the origin of plants and animals, and the theory of the different races of man, that is the guesses about them, are very, very old. Men fancied that there were strange supernatural monsters, who invented these things and fashioned the heavens and the earth. Their theories were continually pruned and improved to meet wider knowledge, and

in certain stages they took the forms we are familiar with in the book of Genesis. Knowledge constantly grew, and the theories were further pruned, and extended even in Old Testament times, and in each successive age transformed, and are at this day continually undergoing the same processes at the hands of philosophers and scientists.

The important things to observe are that we cannot look at or study any complicated set of facts, without some framework of theory to start with ; and that every such framework is provisional, tentative. We hold it only to see whether facts fit into it : if, as our knowledge increases, they do not, we modify the theory so as to include them : and sometimes, indeed again and again, men have had to pitch the whole theory away ; it was patched here, and bulged there, till it could stand no more, and they had to start afresh. Every student of the history of science could give unmistakable illustrations of this process. The important things to observe are, as I said, that we cannot study anything without some framework of theory to help us to arrange and pigeon-hole the facts, and that every theory must be provisional ; we must be always ready to mend it, and if need be to reject it and to take another.

The last remarks are intended to prepare you for some outline of a theory, of a way of regarding life, and mind, and ourselves, which represents, very inadequately, of course, but not unfairly, what some very able minds are now thinking. And in outlining this theory, this philosophy as it really is, do not let us forget Augustin's "*Interrogate thyself, O man.*" But also do not let us forget, that we in this room, one and all, belong to the intellectual rank and file. For this interrogating ourselves we need help, help from those best able to help us: and these are, of course, to be looked for among the few most highly gifted with insight—the seers, the saints, the poets, the prophets of the world: men who, by detaching themselves from the absorbing interest of material things, from the flesh and the world, lived more than others in the pure spiritual world of thoughts and ideas, and thus gained the power better to see things as they are, and become conscious of a purpose and unity in the Drama of the whole, and of themselves as a part of the whole.

The theory then is that the life, will, mind, soul, in each one of us and in all men, in a word, that in us which makes us man, is a manifestation of the supreme, universal life. This universal life is something apart from

matter, different from it, higher than it, though shown in it. We must give that life some name, in order to speak of it, and we call it divine: and we may regard the mind and soul which is in us as a fragment of the divine life, a spark of that life, a seed of that life—using any metaphor we will to indicate that our personal life and mind come into us from some transcendent, or outside source, which we call God; come from God and share His nature, and that we can thus understand something about God. That is a theory—a provisional theory: to be tested like all theories, by seeing whether and how far it embraces and connects and illuminates the facts of experience. This is the answer, when most of the best minds of all ages have followed Augustin's rule and interrogated themselves.

But this is not all. This mind and soul of man is felt, almost universally, to be not a wholly separated fragment of the divine, but to be conscious of a link to something above itself, to reach after it, to desire to share it. It is "a step to that which is above us," as Augustin said. This consciousness, this desire, shows itself as religion. One of the greatest of modern philosophers, Eucken, has expressed this by saying that "The strongest power within the world is 'the

conviction of the overworld.'" That is to say, the conviction which we men, living in this material world, have, that there is an overworld, a supernatural region, force, life, being, mind, is the strongest influence on man. And he has the verdict of the thinking world to support him.

Thus we have come in sight of the true supernatural, that overworld. It is in *ourselves*—it is part of the divine life and mind, of which we are the tiniest fragments, that divine life and mind, which we call God. The conviction of this is the result of man's interrogating himself. It has now rooted itself in human nature, as the result of immense human experience. It is the result of instinct rather than of intellect; and Bergson tells us that "instinct is nearer to life than intellect." It is by this method that man has learned about God. All our convictions, all our knowledge, of this overworld of spirit, and of God as transcendent, has taken its form in human minds, been expressed in human words, in language varying with the age, as the result of human experience of communion between us creatures of a day and the Eternal Father of our spirits. "The heart has its reasons," said Pascal, "of which reason knows nothing." They rest on the same foundation of experience; and have

been established, or are being established, by the same method, the identical scientific method, by which all our knowledge of the material world has been gained. That method is, in brief, as I have stated, first to observe, to note, to interrogate facts and to accumulate experience. Next to make provisional theories to embrace and classify these observations : then to enlarge, to prune, and it may be to discard, and to reconstruct other theories more capable of containing all the observed facts, and thus arrive as near the truth as is at present possible. It is the result of such processes that this theory has been formed. It seems to accord with facts.

"First that which is natural," says St. Paul, "and afterwards that which is spiritual." We have advanced further in the knowledge of the material, or, as we call it, the natural, because it is the simpler, and because it came first in human experience. "Afterwards that which is spiritual" ; the over-world, the supernatural. The method of study is, however, the same, the reality of the resulting knowledge the same ; in both cases and always provisional, imperfect ; but in both cases based on infinite experience and truth to fact.

But we must do more than interrogate ourselves. For, if we are compelled to the

conviction that we ourselves are thus linked to the overworld, or to the supernatural, it follows that unless some chasm separates us from the rest of nature, of which we are apparently so intimate a part, then all that we call nature, all the material world, all things, all life, must be, in its degree, also linked to the overworld ; must also be a manifestation of the supernatural, or, in plainer words, nature must be, like ourselves, a sphere in which the work of God is shown.

Now that there is no separating chasm between man and nature is the emphatic and admitted teaching of science.

We may start with the simplest forms of life, and the steps upwards are continuous, gradual, till the highest forms of life, man himself, is shown. Our bodies are on the same model as those of other animals ; our bodily faculties, sight, hearing, smell, touch, are like theirs ; we cannot be sure of their mental faculties ; but they seem clearly akin to ours. Man is not so separated from the rest of living creatures that we can possibly say that the Divine Life and Mind is shown in man, where we are conscious of it, but is not shown in all life. So that our theory has to be enlarged. Not only is the life, will, mind, soul, in each one of us and in all men, a manifestation of the supreme universal life,

the life of the Transcendent God ; but the life of all living beings is a manifestation, in its varying degree, of that same Divine Life.

And thus—as we contemplate either the infinite and wonderful series of created beings as they are to-day, or the long history, the geologic record of life in the past, how on a globe, at first lifeless, life has originated, developed, varied, and at last become what it is now,—we are in presence of some power, some design, call it what we will, some creative active energy, of which we have faint but sufficient traces in ourselves, and this we call God.

For not only in man, but everywhere behind and within what we call life, is the supernatural. If the processes of our minds, our thought, reason, love, aspiration, conscience, are in any degree akin to the life of God, and come from Him ; so do similar processes in all living beings. There is a manifestation of the Divine, the Supernatural, in the mysterious instincts of the animal creation ; we are in touch there also with the supernatural : and not in the animal creation only ; in the vegetable world also. There is a thought, a purpose, a choice, at work in a flower, a seed, a rootlet, a tendril ; a life, in every manifestation of life : a something transcendent which occupies matter, moulds it, and

makes it the vehicle of life. What is known as evolution is not blind, not mindless, as many disciples of the great Darwin, more daring than he, have said: there is guidance present in it, mind. There is "creative evolution," as Bergson has called it.

Can we help seeing mind in living things? No logic will ever long convince the world of men that nature is mindless. We can make machines, a typewriter, a sewing machine, a gramophone, and when we see such things no one hesitates to attribute the design and the working to the human mind. But a flower. What machine is there to be compared with the simplest flower? There is mind, living mind, active mind, at work in every one. There is a human element, and therefore a Divine element, even in flowers. It is the old unanswerable argument—"He that made the eye shall he not see?"

We have to enlarge, and keep ever enlarging, our thought of God. And do not let us think we shall lose Him in immensity. We are not departing from the saints. They are before us on this path. Ponder on the words of Augustin, "God is nothing else than Supreme Being, Supreme Life."

And there is a yet further extension of our thought necessary. If "interrogating ourselves" has led man to the conviction of the

overworld, and the transcendent being of God, the source of all human faculties, so too, the continuity of man with all created life has taught him, as we have seen, that God is also the source of all animal and vegetable life, and these also are, though they know it not, a manifestation of Divine energy at work, of Divine life. But it is very doubtful whether any final line can be drawn to separate life in its lowest forms from other and non-vital actions. If no such line can be drawn, the purely physical powers of the molecule and the atom and the corpuscle, "the ultimate abysses of creation in which life is born," cannot be otherwise than manifestations of the same Divine Life.

I am giving you what I believe to be the conclusions of scientific, and philosophic reasoning: but as many of you have seen, these conclusions have been anticipated by the saints and by the poets. I have but put into prose the poetical insight of Wordsworth.

Thus we are led to contemplate one immense, orderly drama of creation, proceeding from the action of matter, guided, imbued, impregnated with the infinite and transcendent Divine Mind; passing, it may be, by steps hitherto untraced into life, and thence by an orderly evolution up to man, the head and climax of creation as known to us; man

conscious, moreover, of something above him, conscious of an overworld, of the supernatural, and longing for communion with it, man beginning to seek for God. All the phenomena of man's spiritual life, religion, conscience, duty, philosophy, his consciousness of freedom, his haunting sense of immortality, his reaching forth his arms to the Eternal Father, are parts of this great drama of creation.

The drama is already advanced to a certain stage. This surging, immense, mysterious energy of atom, and of life, has arrived at a certain stage in man. But everything indicates that this stage is not final : all is pointing onwards, ever onwards, to a further development. "We know not," as St. John said, "what we shall be." "First the natural," in its age-long series of developments ; "afterwards that which is spiritual," and that has perhaps only begun. "We know not what we shall be." We are conscious of a spirit, a life within, seeking for communion with what is above and beyond us, and restless till we attain it. We hover, as someone, I think, has said, between two worlds, the physical to which we are linked by our bodies ; the spiritual to which our souls belong, and to which they are looking: we are in the world of the natural, and also in the

world of the supernatural ; and we belong to both.

The question, of course, is in our minds, what is the relation between the natural and the supernatural ? Are they two worlds or one ? It may now be seen and understood that *the natural is the normal and known working of the supernatural.* That appears to me to sum up the final thought to which philosophy has reached. It implies a continuity, a unity, in the energy operating in both spheres, whether material or spiritual. Is it not exactly St. Paul's teaching, " The God and Father of all, Who is above all, and through all, and in you all " ?

If the question is further asked, is there an abnormal working of the supernatural in the material sphere, as well as in life, or the sphere of the spirit ? we can at present only say that the answer we shall give in any particular case depends on observation and evidence. There can be no *a priori* denial such as that " miracles do not happen " : but on the other hand, our conviction of the reality of the supernatural is in no degree dependent on the truth of any particular statement of its abnormal or irregular working in the material sphere. The calmest and strongest faith in God is quite consistent with an acknowledgment of ignorance on many such

points, and therefore with modest suspension of judgment on many questions involving history. But our conviction of the Personality and Freedom of God, of which our own personality and freedom are faint indications, compels us to hold unwaveringly the power of God to set aside at His will the normal processes of nature which are His normal will.

Finally, then, we regard ourselves from the point of view of science and philosophy, as taking part in a great unfinished drama, the drama of the evolution of life and spirit from that mysterious medium in which it lives and operates, which we call matter. That drama is still unfinished : we know something of what we have sprung from : "we know not what we shall be." But the drama has advanced far enough to enable us small actors in it to stand as it were outside it, and look at it, and at ourselves acting in it. We can see ourselves as parts of a whole and to be able in any degree to see and feel this great drama of creation, God's great purpose, and our own small but real power to play a part in it, adds immensely to the dignity and the happiness of life.

EPILOGUE

If my Aberdeen caretaker had been at this lecture, would his verdict have been—"a grand lecture—a grand lecture indeed—I didn't understand a word of it?" I hope not. The verdict which would best please me, if I overheard it as you walked home, would be the question, "What did you think of it?" and the answer: "Well, if that is philosophy, I don't think much of philosophers. He told me nothing new. I've thought all that a dozen times. But perhaps he put it into a bit better shape than I had done."

LECTURE II

THE NATURAL AND THE SUPERNATURAL IN RELIGION

THE former of these two lectures was on the natural and the supernatural in science and philosophy. In it I explained that we applied the word "natural" to events that can be relied on as sure to recur in the same circumstances; and then showed that, owing to the increase of knowledge of such events the sphere of the natural, or of the certainly recurring, has grown till it is now thought, though not proved, to comprehend the whole of the material world. We had therefore to turn away from the world of matter in our quest for the sphere of the supernatural.

Here I took Augustin's saying as my guide: "Interrogate thyself, O man; and make of thyself a step to the things that be above thee." We ourselves were to be the starting point. We must proceed from the known to the unknown.

I began by showing that in making such an enquiry into ourselves we must adopt

some provisional theory by which to scrutinize and arrange the facts of human nature we observed ; and that the one test of the value of any such theory is its capacity for co-ordinating all the facts before us. I then outlined the theory towards which science and philosophy are, as I believe, at present steadily tending—that the life, mind, will, soul of each one of us—in a word all that makes him man—belongs to a different order from matter, and is strictly supernatural, that is, above nature, not sure to recur, having in it an element of freedom, of will. And since this element in us and in all men is insistent that it is linked to, and in communion with, something similar outside and above itself, we rise from the sure foundation of human experience to the conviction of a supernatural world, of which we and all men form part.

Moreover, we find ourselves, as a result of science, to be linked in a continuous chain, physical and mental, to all forms of life and to inorganic matter below us, as well as to the overworld around and above us ; and therefore we come to regard the whole infinite series of living things and physical forces in the present and in the far past geologic and cosmic ages, and the whole series of human faculties and aspirations, as one series : as

the manifestation, continuous and progressive, of that one universal life, and energy which in the language of religion we call the eternal God—the "One God and Father of all, who is above all and through all, and in all."

Science, therefore, and philosophy appear to me to have come to regard the "natural" as the orderly and known working of the "supernatural"; that is, to regard the material sphere as interpenetrated and operated on by a spiritual power.

Such a theory lays before us a unity and purpose in one vast drama of creation in which for the moment each of us is an actor. It is a drama unfinished. We partly know or guess what we have been; "we know not what we shall be."

If it were possible to convey in one sentence what I believe to be the clear trend of philosophy and science to-day, I should say that it is to establish a theory of a spiritual origin of the universe and of the forces that maintain it, in place of the materialism that attracted so many minds in the last century. This summarizes my former lecture.

And now I come to the subject of this second lecture—the natural and the supernatural *in religion*.

First as to place of the natural in religion.

We may at once remark that the old problem of reconciling "religion and science" has almost passed into limbo. These lectures are not, what they would have been forty years ago, an apologetic for the supernatural against attacks from science. They are meant to show science and religion as allied in their recognition of something above nature, and in their investigation of it in their respective spheres.

The natural is the sphere of science: but the results securely won by science in that field are of immense value in religion, because they have so vastly enlarged our conception of the scale and order and marvels of the universe; that universe which is ever before our eyes as a silent witness to God: and have therefore enlarged our conception of God. In this lecture I cannot dwell on this thought. Some of you may remember that I brought it before you two or three years ago, in a lecture on "Water: a study in Natural Theology."* Here I will only add that if the Psalmist could long ago say "The heavens declare the glory of God, and the firmament sheweth His handiwork," now to-day the amazing revelation of the scale and intricacy

* Published with other lectures in "Problems of Religion and Science," by Canon Wilson. Macmillan's Sixpenny Series.

of the universe of stars, and the no less amazing revelation of the complexity of the atom, show it more plainly: they tell us what a stage of the natural has been provided by the Creator on which His great spiritual drama of life and freedom, of conscience and personality, has already begun to be acted. "First the natural: and after that the spiritual;" and from the magnificence of the stage we may learn something of the greatness of the drama for which that stage is prepared.

But the special sphere of religion is the supernatural, the world in which human souls and God exist. This world is of course the same for philosophy as for religion. It is no dream. It is a fact of science. We know its existence by "interrogating" ourselves. There is, however, a difference in the attitude of mind, and the purpose with which, from the points of view of science and religion respectively, we approach this world above nature. Let us try to think out some of the more obvious differences in these respects.

One such difference is obvious. I once more repeat Augustin's saying, "Interrogate thyself, O man, and make of thyself a step to the things that be above thee." Now in science we have interrogated ourselves; but starting from human experience it is to the things that are below us that science has

turned, as I showed in my former lecture,—to the animal and vegetable and inorganic worlds. We rightly regard these as below man in mental and spiritual development; and science has shown us a spiritual unity acting, living, in all the material universe. But religion turns in the opposite direction. Starting from the same human experience—starting from ourselves—it turns to the things that are *above* us: to aspirations and ideals; to all that we feel to be good and beautiful and true; to our own conscience and will and personality. Through these we are drawn up to the conviction of an unseen and personal origin of all that is good and beautiful; the origin also of our own power to see it as good and beautiful; that origin of all things and all powers which we call God. Religion, in a word, looks upwards to the supernatural, while science looks downwards to the natural. In the field of human life the spheres of the natural and the supernatural meet and overlap, and we can look either up or down.

A second point of difference is that in science there is no statement of fundamental importance that depends on history, or on any testimony which cannot be verified. That is not the case with religion. Here I am speaking of the Christian Faith. In it there

is an irremovable and essential element of history. The difference here is great. For no fact of history can either be proved *a priori*, or be verified by an appeal to facts to be repeated to-day. An event in history cannot be repeated. The ground for belief in statements of history is of a totally different kind. This difference is in the nature of things. The sphere of the natural is the sphere of unvarying forces, which can be repeated: but the sphere of the supernatural is the sphere of personalities, of freedom, of change, of human and Divine action; and therefore of events taking place in time, recorded in history, taking their place in an ordered development.* History and Time are implied in the idea of development.

A third difference follows: Authority plays small part in determining scientific belief. But it may play a great part in ethics and religion. Our own visions of truth and holiness and God are dim and fragmentary, and intermittent. And if others, of purer eyes and steadier gaze, have helped us to see what we had not seen before, then, when clouds pass over our own eyes, we may use theirs.

* Events in natural development, such as the appearance of new varieties, have taken place in time: and there may be a development of chemical elements in time But they are not of *fundamental* importance at present.

We may do well to rely on their "authority" on such points. We ought not lightly to "differ from the saints."

I will mention one more difference, because it helps to bring out the place of the supernatural in religion. The interest of the philosopher or scientist, as such, in the supernatural is purely intellectual, speculative. Its pursuit gratifies curiosity, as a theory of the tides or of magnetism might interest him; he could lay it aside. But when a man has once thought of the supernatural from the point of religion, that is of his own highest nature, to speak of being interested in it would raise a smile. It is absorbing; it is ever-present; he cannot conceive of laying it aside. It is a vision of holiness and justice. It brings him into the presence of God. It determines his aim in life.

Religion is then wholly in the sphere of the supernatural. But in order to avoid any mistake let me remind you once more what we mean by "natural." Everything that happens so regularly that we can reckon on it we call natural, and we regard it as subject to fixed and unchanging laws. But there is a part of our own human nature which obstinately refuses to be so reckoned on that it can be called in this sense natural; we cannot believe its action to be determined by any

invariable law. We *know* that we possess freedom of the will. You can at this or any moment stretch out your right hand or your left, do this or that, within physical limits imposed by what is natural. This freedom of will, our own conscience of right and wrong, our own power of directing our thoughts, in a word our own personality, is a final and conclusive proof that there is something in us which is not "natural," in the sense defined, that is, fixed and determined by physical causes. We interrogate ourselves, and it is in ourselves that we find the supernatural. It is not something doubtful, imaginary, exceptional; it is not something that others say they have witnessed. It is our very selves; we ourselves are at home in it, and it in us. It is with us in every thought and will and act. "The word is very nigh thee, in thy mouth, and in thy heart."

We exist, in fact, in a world of the supernatural; as familiar to us as the air we breathe, so that we never think of it. What an unaccountable element in our lives, for example, is the influence of others. "Influence"! What do we mean? The very word implies a theory. Something flowing in; something therefore that flows out from others; not material, not calculable, not in the true sense "natural." When two stones lie side by side

their "influence" on one another is exactly measurable and absolutely certain. It is not so with us, free persons in the spiritual world, living side by side. I want you to realize that nothing is more familiar or more certain in our lives than what we call the supernatural. The "influence" of others, present or distant, living or departed, by word or prayer or memory, is incalculable. It is one of the great realities in life. And it refuses to be resolved into an effort of our own fancy.

Religion, however rudimentary, lives in the supernatural. Its feet and hands are in the natural; its head and heart are always in the overworld. Every conception in religion, and in Christianity in particular, life, duty, conscience, right and wrong, freedom, the soul, immortality, sin, eternal life, God, the Trinity of Persons, the Divine Indwelling, are efforts to grasp and express something in the supernatural world.

Christianity is however also, as I said before, a historical religion; in the sense that we believe that the growth of men's knowledge of God has been continuously advanced, both by the diffused light of God brightening in human souls, and in particular times and places by the teaching and influence of greatly gifted individuals. Above all we believe that there did, as a matter of history, come into

this world "in the fulness of time," some 1900 years ago, a Person whom we know as Jesus Christ, Who opened a fresh communion for us with the supernatural world and God. We believe that this Person did, as a matter of history, create a new epoch, and advance the spiritual progress of man towards a higher stage, according to the Purpose of God. We believe, moreover, as a matter of history, that He was Himself supernatural, both in His Person and in His Power; to say the least in a far higher degree than any man is supernatural; and that we most truly interpret and summarize the historical facts by our belief that he was an Incarnation in man of the Divine.

These beliefs be it observed are based *on history*. They may therefore be legitimately questioned and disputed by students of history. They are not accepted as true by all men. But I believe that under the strictest examination, with the widest learning, these main facts of history stand fast and firm in the impartial court of history. It is in that court they must be tried. They cannot be rejected, as science shows, on any *a priori* grounds. But the reasons for this belief in the general trustworthiness of the Gospel Story cannot be summarized here. They rest on criticism and history of the past; and

the belief finds its confirmation in the experience of the present.

"The experience of the present!" Before you pass from these words stop a moment to think what is implied in them—what is implied, but cannot here be even outlined; cannot here be more than hinted at. What a light is faith in Christ as the revelation of God at this hour to our sad and perplexed world! an assurance that love is supreme, that suffering is not in vain; a clue to the eternal problem What? and Whence? and Whither? and the satisfaction of our aspirations. Think what faith in Christ has been and is, at this hour, in cottage and in cloister, to child and adult, in peace and in war: how it is, and always has been, the inspiration of fervent idealism, and of patient endurance, the bond of brotherhood, and the hope in life and in death. This is what is implied in saying that belief in Christ as divine finds not a proof but a confirmation in the experience of the present.

"Make of thyself," said Augustin, "a step to the things that be above thee." The Eternal and Infinite God is too far for us to reach, and therefore "in the fulness of time" in His mercy and wisdom God sent His Son in the likeness of man, to serve for ever as a step for mankind to the things that are

above them, to help us to communion through Him with the Eternal God.

The whole of religion is in the sphere of the mind and conscience and will—in the sphere of the supernatural—though it finds its expression in action. We find it in ourselves: we verify it, or may verify it, every day. We are all of us rooted in the Divine. And we recognize it in others. We see it to be universal. We are on a firm foundation.

Moreover, we know that there are some persons, living, it may be to-day, or standing out in history, more conscious than we have been of communion with the Divine.

Far above all is the compelling figure of Christ, Christ in Himself, and Christ as the Revealer of God the Father of all. He completes and explains the intuitions of the divine in ourselves. He shows us what these faint aspirations after goodness in each of us really are—fragments of the Divine. And it is out of these fragments that the City of God, the City of human brotherhood on earth, has to be built, nay, is even now being built. They seem as inadequate as the five loaves and the two small fishes to feed the multitude. But in Christ's hands they will multiply. They lie in you and me and thousands round us almost unused. We none of us are as good as we might be, did

we dare to give free play to the best that is in us. Let us use them more freely. It is this that gives zest and meaning to life, to use, in working with God and for Him, all the tiny elements of good He has given us. We all possess them. The Divine, "the Kingdom of God," as Christ told us, "is within"; and it is within us all.

It is with the hope of making plain to all that the root of all religion and faith in God and in Christ is in the divine, the supernatural, in ourselves, always at hand and certain, always to be tested and verified by our own experiences, that I have given this lecture.

I have now concluded what may be called the constructive part of this second lecture. Such appears to me to be the position of the natural and the supernatural in religion, and in particular in Christianity.

But I cannot but feel that, if I stopped here, some of you would leave the room with a sense of unsatisfied expectation. You might reasonably say that my treatment of the supernatural is unlike what you expected. I have brought the supernatural into present everyday ordinary life. You have perhaps regarded it as exceptional, remote from us in time and space, as occurring only in history. In a word you perhaps expected the lecture to

deal with the miracles recorded in the Old and New Testaments, or perhaps with reported miracles and occult phenomena of to-day. Those miracles were to you "the supernatural." You expected me to tell you how they are regarded by thoughtful and religious men of to-day.

That is exactly what I should myself have wished for forty or fifty years ago. But I have not dealt with this particular question to-day for two reasons at least. One is that it turns on history and criticism and evidence as well as on science, and needs a volume rather than a lecture, and that excellent volumes upon it may be seen in libraries. I cannot deal with everything in two lectures. The other is that I wished to speak of the question as presented to-day, not as presented half a century ago. Since that time science in all its departments has much changed its attitude towards the supernatural. Science is far more conscious than it then was of its limitations. I speak with memory still fresh of many discussions I had with scientific men of that age. I lived then in the scientific world. There seemed no bounds to the pretensions or to the conquests of science. But now science is conscious that it is ringed in, fenced in, everywhere with a mystery that none can explain. Then

scientific men passed such mysteries by, as outside their business. The nature and origin of order and law in the universe need not be in any degree present to the mind in the fullest exposition of that order and law in physics and chemistry. The astronomer need not enquire how gravitation acts ; that it acts is enough for him. The biologist does not profess to know what life is ; he only studies its phenomena. Scientific students are, however, conscious now of these questions that lie behind the natural. The great men, such as Huxley, and Darwin, Adams, and Stokes, were conscious of them then, and were modest. The rank and file, and some men of eminence, were extraordinarily cocksure. Times have changed. Tyndall's Presidential Address to the British Association at Belfast would meet with small sympathy from the scientists of to-day. Since that day we have learnt to see that everywhere in science we come to the limits of the natural, and peer out into the unknown and supernatural that lie beyond ; and in religion we are all the time in the supernatural. The old feud of science and religion is at an end. They are allies.

It was my deliberate intention to draw the line between the natural and the supernatural at a point where you did not expect it to be

drawn. I wished to lead you away from the habit we have all formed of looking for the supernatural only in the material world, and in a form involving some violation of natural order. There its occurrence is necessarily exceptional and doubtful—since in every case other explanations are possible; nor should we look for its occurrence only in the far past, where it depends on testimony, and is therefore always disputable. I have wished to lead you to see the supernatural where it is universal, that is, in the experience of us all; and where it is certain, that is in our own nature. We "make of *ourselves* a step to the things that be above us"; there is the base on which religion rests.

And I am sure that, if we examine ourselves, that is the real order of our ordinary thought. Few, I imagine, believe Christ to be the unique Revealer of God, and Redeemer of men because of the physical miracles we associate with Him. On the contrary it is because whatever is best and divinest in ourselves instinctively sees in Christ that before which we must bow as Supreme, and because we cannot but see Him as the one Divine Figure in history, the unique Guide of men on the upward path, that we accept the miracles of His Person and His power, as inevitable and in the highest sense natural,

though they are beyond our faculties to explain or to reproduce.

It is the old truth, seen long ago, but slowly penetrating the soul and mind of men, that the Word, the Spirit of God, is "very nigh us, in our heart, and in our mouth"; that it "lightens every one." You will now see why my lecture has taken its present form.

FINALLY, do not imagine for an instant that the view I have put before you removes all speculative difficulties, or was intended to do so. Any theory about God and man that professes to make everything quite plain and simple stands self-condemned. The only help that any man can give his brother in such matters is to show that each special difficulty is but a part of the one infinite question of our existence.

Bishop Westcott was once asked by a young clergyman about some theological difficulty. He replied at some length in the way I have indicated. "Thank you," said the man. "Now you have made it all perfectly clear." Those who knew the Bishop will picture him as with flashing eyes he exclaimed, "Oh, I hope I have not! I hope I have not done that!"

The aim of my lecture has been to show that the difficulties all thoughtful men feel have been fully faced by others

of wider reading and equal honesty, and have not destroyed their faith. Mysteries remain, and will remain. No one who has begun to realize the immensity of the universe with which science deals, and sees it as but the stage on which the spiritual drama of life is being played, will think that he can understand God, or that his failure to understand involves his denying God. It involves admitting that his thought of God has been, and is, and will remain very inadequate, partial. We have light enough, within us and without us, to walk by, and that is all we need.

I venture to give here two quotations. One is from a letter which Bishop Lightfoot wrote to Archbishop Benson, on some question of Theology—

"There is nothing so dangerous on such a topic as the desire to make everything right and tight. I do not know whether it is that my mind is illogical, but I find that my faith suffers nothing by leaving a thousand questions open, so long as I am convinced on two or three main lines."

Another is from Lord Bacon—

"If a man will begin with certainties he shall end in doubts; but if he will be content to begin with doubts, he will end in certainties."

If these lectures have in any degree helped to increase our intellectual humility, enlarged our thought of God, strengthened our faith in Him, and deepened our sense of human responsibility as sharing the nature and the work of God, for that result I am thankful.

THE END

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